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CAPTAIN JEDEDIAH S. SMITH.

THE PATHFINDER OF THE SIERRAS.

BY J. M. GUINN.

(Read May 4, 1896.)

History furnishes few examples of daring and adventure comparable to those of the fur trappers and hunters of the tramontane regions of the Great West.

These hunters and trappers were the forerunners of advancing civilization in the far West—the pathfinders of tramontane emigration. Beginning in the first decade of the present century and continuing through a period of thirty years they explored the ulterior regions west of the Mississippi, from the confines of the Arctic Ocean on the north to the borders of Mexico on the south.

Unaided and unprotected by the government of their country, they pushed boldly out into the unexplored regions beyond the Mississippi. The country was terra incognita; they knew nothing of it beyond the verge of their horizon. In the pursuit of their perilous vocation they crossed alkaline deserts; penetrated dark and dangerous defiles, and scaled mountain ranges hitherto untrodden by foot of civilized man. They launched their frail canoes on nameless rivers, without knowing whither their swift currents would carry them, or in what rapids or whirlpools they might be engulfed. Constantly in danger from savage foes, both man and beast, their lives were spent in one long continued existence of suspense and watchfulness. Skilled in all the artifices of the wily Indian, and ever on the alert against his ambushes and attacks, yet notwithstanding their bravery and their caution, it is said that three-fifths of the pioneer trappers who crossed the Rocky Mountains, perished by the hands of the Indians.

These hunters and trappers were, for the most part, unlettered men, and their intercourse with civilization rarely extended beyond the border settlements of the far West. Consequently, the stories of their adventures were unwritten, and the credit of their discoveries too often given to men who followed their trails years after they were first traced.

Twenty years before Fremont, the Pathfinder, made his explorations in the Great Basin and the valleys of California, Bridger had discovered Great Salt Lake; Ashley had traversed the Great Basin from the Rockies, westward to the Sierra Nevadas, had discovered Utah Lake, and built a fort and trading post on its shores, and Jedediah Smith, the pioneer trapper of California, had crossed the Sierras, had explored the valleys of the San Joaquin and the Sacramento; had followed the Cascade range from the

Klamath to Columbia; had marked out what afterwards became the overland emigrant trail by way of the great Salt Lake, across the deserts of Nevada, down the Humboldt and over the Snowy Mountains into the valley of the Sacramento; and had traced that other emigrant trail by which, in later years, so many belated Argonauts found their way from Salt Lake across the mountains and deserts to Los Angeles.

Of the early history of Jedediah S. Smith, the first white man who crossed the Sierra Nevada Mountains we know but little. Quigly in his "Irish Race in California" claims that Smith was born in Kings County, Ireland. This is an error. Smith was of Puritan stock. He was born in Connecticut. He was the eldest of thirteen children. Early in the present century his father emigrated to the Western Reserve in Ohio, and settled in Ashtabula county. Amid the rude surroundings of pioneer life, young Smith grew to manhood. By some means he seems to have obtained a good education. A shipping manifest (now in possession of W. R. Bacon, Esq., of this city) made out by Smith in 1812 for a cargo of goods shipped on Lake Erie, is written in a hand write clear and distinct as copperplate, and is made out in good business form. We have no record of when he began the life of a trapper. We first hear of him as an employee of Gen. Ashley in 1822. He had command of a band of trappers on the waters of Snake River, in 1824. Afterward he became a partner of Ashley's, under the firm name of Ashley & Smith, and subsequently one of his successors in the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. He had the reputation of being an honorable, truthful and reliable man. Col. Warner, who met him in St. Louis in 1830, after the return from Green river of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company's wagon trains with furs, gives this account of his interview with him and his impressions of the man:

"Instead of finding 'a Leather Stocking,' I met a well bred, intelligent and Christian gentlemen, who repressed my youthful ardor and fancied pleasures for the life of a trapper and mountaineer by informing me, that if I went into the Rocky Mountains, the chances were much greater in favor of meeting death than of finding a restoration of health; and that if I escaped the former and secured the latter, the probabilities were that I would be ruined for anything else, in life, than such things as would be agreeable to the passions of a semi-savage. He said that he had spent about eight years in the mountains and should not return to them."

There is a wide disparity in the accounts given by different historians of Smith's adventures, and the dates given of some of the events of his explorations vary considerably. For instance, Coloner Warner gives the date of his first entrance into California, as 1824, and his route through Walker's Pass, Cronise, McClellan and others, give the date as 1825, by the same route. Bancroft gives 1826 as the year, and the place of his

arrival, San Gabriel Mission, and from there north by the Mojave to Tulares. Our society has a copy made by H. D. Barrows from Col. Warner's MSS. of "California Fur Trappers," in which is a short sketch of Smith's adventures. In my paper I shall follow the narrative of Col. Warner, except when the preponderance of evidence shows that he is incorrect. I also supply from other sources a number of important facts and incidents which Col. Warner has omitted, or of which he was ignorant.

Smith, on his first expedition to California, started from the Rocky Mountain Fur Company's Post, near Great Salt Lake, August 22, 1826, with a band of fifteen hunters and trappers. His object was to find some new country that had not been occupied by a fur company. He moved in a southwesterly direction. He discovered a river, which he called the Adams (after the President, John Quincy Adams) now known as the Rio Virgin. This stream he followed to its junction with the Colorado. He followed down that river to the Mojave villages, where he rested fifteen days. Here he found two wandering neophytes from the California Missions, who guided his party across the desert to the San Gabriel Mission, where he arrived early in December, 1826.

Although Mexico had gained its independence of Spain and become a Republic, the proscriptive laws of Spain, against foreigners entering Mexican territory, were still in force. The Americans were arrested and compelled to give up their arms. Smith, the leader, was taken to San Diego to give an account of himself to the Commandante General, Echeandia. Smith claimed that he had been compelled to enter the territory on account of the loss of his horses and a scarcity of provisions. He was finally released upon the endorsement of several American ship captains, who were then at San Diego, in the following rather curious certificate of character, which is still in existence:

"We, the undersigned, having been requested by Capt. Jedediah S. Smith, to state our opinions regarding his entering the Province of California, do not hesitate to say that we have no doubt but that he was compelled to for want of provisions and water, having entered so far into the barren country that lies between the latitudes of forty-two and forty-three west, that he found it impossible to return by the route he came, as his horses had most of them perished for want of food and water, he was therefore under the necessity of pushing forward to California—it being the nearest place where he could procure supplies to enable him to return.

"We further state as our opinion that the account given by him is circumstantially correct, and that his sole object was the hunting and trapping of beaver and other furs. We have also examined the passports produced by him from the Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the government of the

United States of America, and do not hesitate to say we believe them perfectly correct.

"We also state that, in our opinion his motives for wishing to pass by a different route to the Columbia river on his return is solely because he feels convinced that he and his companions run great risks of perishing if they return by the route they came

In testimony whereof we have hereunto set our hands and seals this 20th day of December, 1826.

WM. G. DANA, Capt Schooner Waverly,

WM. A. CUNNINGHAM, Capt. Ship Courier,

WM. HENDERSON, Capt Brig. Olive Branch,

THOMAS M. ROBINSON, Mate, Schooner Waverly,

THOS. SHAW, Supercargo Ship Courier."

On this showing, Smith was allowed to take his departure. He purchased horses and supplies at San Gabriel, but did not leave the country until February. The authorities had grown uneasy at his continued presence in the country. He had moved his camp to San Bernardino. Orders were issued to detain him, but before they could be executed, he had left by way of Cajon Pass for the Tulare regions. He trapped on the tributaries of the San Joaquin, and by May had reached a fork of the Sacramento, near the present site of the town of Folsom, on the river since called the American from that fact, where he established a summer camp. Here again his presence disturbed the Padres. Four hundred neophytes of the Mission San Jose, had escaped from their taskmasters, and joined the gentiles (as the wild Indians were called) in the Sacramento valley. Smith and his trappers were accused of decoying them away. The charge was investigated and proved to be false. Still the presence of the Americans worried Padre Duran. Smith wrote him the following conciliatory letter, which is still preserved:

Reverend Father: I understand through the medium of one of your Christian Indians that you are anxious to know who we are—as some of the Indians have been at the Mission and informed you that there were certain white people in the country. We are Americans, on our journey to the river Columbia. We were in at the Mission San Gabriel January last. I went to San Diego and saw the General and got a passport from him to pass on to that place. I have made several efforts to pass the mountains, but the snow being so deep I could not succeed in getting over. I returned to this place—it being the only point to kill meat—to wait a few weeks until the snow melts so that I can go on. The Indians here also being friendly, I consider it the most safe point for me to remain until such time as I can cross the mountains with my horses—having lost a great many in attempting to cross ten or fifteen days since. I am a long way from home and am

anxious to get there as soon as the nature of the case will admit. Our situation is quite unpleasant, being destitute of clothing and most of the necessities of life, wild meat being our principal subsistence.

I am Reverend Father, your strange but real friend and Christian,
J. S. SMITH.

May 19, 1827.

The next day, Smith with two companions, leaving the remainder of his company, started on his return journey; he followed up the American river to its source and crossed the Sierra Nevadas near the head of the Truckee river.

Of this event he writes:

"On May 20, 1827, with two men, seven horses and two mules, I started from the valley. In eight days we crossed Mount Joseph, losing two horses and one mule. (Col. Warner says his animals were frozen to death.) After a march of twenty days eastward from Mount Joseph (the Sierra Nevadas) I reached the southwesterly corner of the Great Salt Lake. The country separating it from the mountains is arid and without game. Often we had no water for two days at a time. When we reached Salt Lake we had left only one horse and one mule, so exhausted that they could hardly carry our slight baggage. We had been forced to eat the horses that had succumbed."

The route taken by Smith from the Sierras to Salt Lake was substantially that followed by the overland emigration of later years. He discovered the Humboldt, which he named the Mary river, a name it bore until changed by Fremont in 1845. (The discovery of the Humboldt is also attributed to Henry Skein Ogden, a famous trapper.)

Soon after his arrival at the Company's rendezvous, on the Green river, Smith organized another band of trappers. He followed down the Green river to where that stream bends to the west; here he left it and continued southerly over the high table lands, between that and the Grand river. He crossed the latter river and changed his course to the southwest, reached the Colorado at the Great Cañon. Finding it impossible to approach the river on account of the perpendicular bluffs, he worked his way southerly until below the cañon he reached the river at a Mojave rancheria. Here his party built rafts and prepared to cross the river. Smith and two others, Galbraith and Turner, had crossed to the western bank, and the remainder of the party were about to follow on rafts. The Indians, who had been aiding them to cross and who had hitherto manifested a most friendly disposition, suddenly, without warning, arose upon the party and treacherously massacred all except the three who had crossed over.

Language is inadequate to portray the horror of the situation that confronted Smith and his two companions. Behind them was a howling band

of savages, intent on their destruction; before them stretched two hundred miles of treeless and waterless desert. To turn back meant certain death by the hands of the savages; to go forward almost certain death by starvation and thirst. They were not men to hesitate. They pushed out boldly into the desert. The story of their hardships and sufferings has never been written, possibly never told. It was but one of many such events incident to their hazardous occupation. Col. Warner, says that late in November, they reached the Mission San Gabriel, where they were arrested by the military authorities and sent to San Diego. In this, Warner is incorrect. There is no record of Smith's arrest on this journey, nor of his arrival with two companions at the Mission. Col. Warner has confounded this journey with Smith's arrival the previous year, when he was arrested, as the records show. I am inclined to agree with Bancroft in his opinion that Warner has reversed the order of Smith's two journeys, and that it was on the last trip that he entered the Tulare valley at or near Walker's Pass. Smith probably crossed the desert and striking his old trail of the previous year, followed it across the Mojave desert into the Tulares, and thence northward to the camp of his men on the American river.

After Smith's departure the previous year, the Californians supposed they were rid of their troublesome visitors. In September they discovered the Americans were still there. Orders were at one time issued to arrest them and bring the trappers to San Jose, but whether they were taken there is not clear. On Smith's return he reported at Monterey, and Captain Cooper signed a bond for his good behavior while he remained in the country. General Echeandia gave Smith permission to purchase horses, provisions and other supplies. He was required to take his party out of the country without delay, and in future not to visit the coast south of latitude 42 degrees. To avoid the Sierra Nevadas and the desert country lying to the west and southwest of Salt Lake, Smith resolved to proceed northerly, keeping the Sierra Nevadas on his right, and by a detour around their northern limit reach the waters of Snake river, north of Salt Lake. As he followed up the Sacramento river, the country became so rough that he abandoned his proposed route and struck off toward the coast, which he reached about one hundred miles north of Ross, a port and settlement of the Russian Fur Company. Traveling northerly along the coast, he reached the Umpqua river. They encamped on a small island near the mouth of the river opposite a branch flowing in from the northeast; both island and branch were named after Smith. The party had trapped on their northward journey and secured at least \$20,000 worth of furs, and had in their train about 150 horses. The Indians who had been allowed to enter the camp appeared friendly.

"After breakfast, Smith accompanied by one of his men, left camp in

search of a ford. Scarcely were they out of sight when the camp was attacked and fifteen men were killed. Hearing the commotion, Smith turned, only to see the party annihilated and his property seized. His safety being in flight alone, he hurried across the river with his companion, and after severe suffering found his way to Vancouver, which he reached bare-headed and foot-sore, and more nearly dead than alive. Two others of the party, Arthur Black and Turner, who was acting as cook on that fatal morning, saved themselves as by a miracle. Black was a powerful fellow, as well as active and light of foot; hand to hand he fought the foe until he managed finally to elude his grasp and hide himself in the forest. Turner brained four of the savages with a firebrand, a half burned poplar stick, and so effected his escape. These two also reached Fort Vancouver in a most pitiable plight, their clothing torn to rags, and almost starved to death. They had subsisted during their journey on snails, toads, bugs and fern roots." (Bancroft's History of the North West Coast, Vol. II.)

Smith entered into an arrangement with McLaughlin, the chief factor or Governor of the Hudson Bay Company, by which it was agreed on the part of the governor that he would send a party of men to the Umpqua River Indians, with whom the company was on trading terms and endeavor to recover from them the furs and other property belonging to Smith, and bring the same to Fort Vancouver. In consideration of this friendly assistance, Smith was required to sell his furs to the company at a stipulated price, which was less than half their value in St. Louis. All other property of the Americans recovered from the Indians was to be turned over to the Hudson Bay Company at a nominal figure. Another stipulation of the contract was that Smith should send one of his men who had escaped the massacre to guide a band of the Company's trappers into California. Turner was sent with a party under the leadership of McLeod. McLeod's trappers made a most successful season's hunt, but leaving the valley too late in the year, were caught in a snow storm on a stream since known as the McLeod river. His horses and mules froze to death; he was compelled to cache his furs in the snow, and after incredible hardships and sufferings, he and his men reached Fort Vancouver. Before the furs could be recovered the next spring, the melting snow had ruined them and McLeod, for his imprudence, or from his misfortunes, was discharged from the employ of the Hudson Bay Company.

While Smith was absent with a party on the Umpqua expedition, the governor had fitted out another party of trappers, under Peter Skein Ogden. Ogden was sent up the Columbia to the Snake river, where he was to turn southward; travel until he found Smith's trail over the mountains into the California valley. Ogden crossed the mountains on Smith's trail and trapped successfully the tributaries of the San Joaquin and returned to Fort

Vancouver by McLeod's route of the previous year. Smith returned to the Shoshone country. The next year (1829) while descending the Colorado, trading and trapping, he was again attacked by Indians and lost all his outfit.

In 1830 we find him in St Louis, having just returned from the Rocky Mountain Fur Company's rendezvous on the Green river with a wagon train of furs. He sold out his interest in the company to Sublette and Jackson. In 1831, in company with his former partners, he fitted out a train for the Santa Fe trade. The party consisted of eighty five men, with twenty-three wagons, drawn by six mules each. Ten of the wagons belonged to Smith, and one, a joint partnership wagon, carried a piece of artillery. Warner entered the employ of Smith. He thus describes his death:

"Between the Arkansas and the Cimarron rivers the party suffered extremely from a hot, burning south wind and the want of water. There was neither path, trail nor guide to lead the party to water. On the morning of the second day, after leaving the Arkansas river, Smith rode on in advance of the train in search of water. He did not return. Soon after the arrival of the party at Santa Fe, (July 4th, 1831,) some New Mexican traders, who had been out near the Cimarron river, trading with the Arapahos, came into Santa Fe, bringing the rifle and holster pistols of Smith, which they said they had purchased from the Indians, who stated that they had killed the owner on the Cimarron river. The Indians said that a small party of their hunters were ambushed behind the bank of the river, waiting for buffalo to come down and drink. The bed of the river in summer is usually dry, except occasional pools, where the water comes to the surface. While the Indians were ambushed near a water hole, a horseman rode up, dismounted, and he and his horse drank from the pool. While standing by his horse, they suddenly rushed upon him, thrusting a lance through his body. He turned upon them and shot one of their number dead. The rifle and pistols were percussion locks, with which the Indians were not acquainted, so they sold them to the New Mexican traders." Thus perished by the hands of cowardly savages in the wilds of New Mexico, a man who through almost incredible dangers and sufferings had explored an unknown region, as vast in extent as that which gave fame and immortality to the African explorer, Stanley; and who marked out trails over mountains and across deserts that Fremont following years afterwards, won the title of "Pathfinder of the Great West."

Two of Captain Smith's brothers accompanied the train. The widow of Peter Smith one of these brothers, before her death, wrote the following account of the tragedy in which Smith lost his life. (A copy of the account was kindly furnished me by W. R. Bacon, Esq., nephew by marriage of Capt. Smith:) "When well out in the desert he found that his guide was

incompetent and that the way had been lost. After traveling for three days without water, Captain Smith set out alone in search of the Cimarron river, the only known water supply in that part of the country. As was afterwards ascertained he had traveled fifteen miles when he struck the Cimarron, he followed down its dry bed until he found a small water hole, dismounted and drank and let his horse drink, and was in the act of remounting when he was surrounded by Indians, the chief of whom made a thrust with a spear which Smith received in his right arm. Realizing that he must die, he determined to sell his life as dearly as possible, and with this pistol and its mate killed three of the Indians, one of them being the chief of the tribe. This pistol fell into the hands of the Indians, and for the reason that it had killed their chief, they regarded it as "evil medicine" and sold it to a party of Mexicans who were out trading at the time. From these Mexicans, Smith's brother who was with the train recovered the pistol and received the foregoing account of Captain Smith's death. A party was sent out from the train which recovered the body. It was buried at Santa Fe."

The pistol referred to above and the holsters are now in the possession of Mrs. W. R. Bacon, of No. 928 Burlington avenue, this city. Mrs. Bacon is a niece of Captain Jedediah S. Smith and the daughter of his youngest brother, Peter Smith. It is a silver mounted single barreled pistol of large caliber; Smith had carried the pistols ten years. Captain Smith kept a journal of his travels and adventures. He had prepared maps of the country that he had explored with the intention of publishing a book of his travels. His papers and maps were stored in a building in St. Louis. Just before he started on his last journey the building was burned and all his collections lost. Smith seems to have been a man whom "Unmerciful disaster followed fast and followed faster" through life; and yet his disasters were not the results of indiscretion but rather a concomitant of his adventurous nature, and the perilous vocation he followed.

ERRATA.

Page 10,	line 16,	read Coronel; for Caronel
" 28,	" 1,	read: who were founders of families.
" 30,	" 1,	" cuera blanca.
" 30, 31	" —	" Ruiz for Ruis.
" 36,	" 34,	" conquista for conquesta.
" 49,	" 34,	" rancheria for rancharia.
" 59,	" 5,	" those who are qualified, etc.
" 60,	" 12,	" part for past.
" 61,	" 18,	" fallacies for follaces.
" 62,	" 6,	" Señora for Soñora.
" 63,	" 24,	" clung for cling.
" 67,	" 37,	" says for say.